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SUBJECT: GEORGIA'S VITAL RAILWAY LINK TO ARMENIA REOPENS

REF: YEREVAN 682

¶1. (U) The Metekhi-Grakali section of the railway bridge near the Georgian town of Gori, destroyed August 16 in the course of the recent Russia-Georgia conflict, was fully restored and recommissioned on September 10, according to Armenian Transportation Ministry spokeswoman Sona Tonoyan. The bridge's destruction completely disrupted transport of Armenia's commodity supplies originating from the Georgian sea ports of Poti and Batumi, which represented the corridor through which up to 80 percent of Armenia's import and export commodities, including foodstuffs and fuel, depends. Tonoyan confirmed reports that authorities in Georgia had completely restored the Metekhi-Grakali section of the bridge, which eliminated the backlog of goods by September 11.

¶2. (SBU) While the Georgian Railway company had suggested that repair of the damaged section would take up to one month following the explosion, the GOAM dispatched a team of experts and technical staff, as well as a trainload of construction materials to assist the Georgian authorities to refurbish an alternative old bridge that had been used prior to the construction of the vital Metekhi-Grakali section. Tonoyan reported that as a result of the joint effort, the bypass link became operational on August 26, saving Armenia from a potential food crisis. (GOAM officials reported privately to us that the GOG sent the Armenian railroad engineers home again after only one day of work, which was perceived here as another snub of Armenia by Georgian officials. The GOAM has kept this fact quiet.) Because of the alternate bridge's lower capacity, its inability to accommodate the necessary goods turnover led to a backlog of Armenia-bound goods in Poti and Batumi and also caused a temporary fuel shortage in Armenia (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT: The destruction of the vital link in Georgia's rail network highlighted how vulnerable landlocked Armenia can be to external shocks to its supply lines. It also underlined Armenia's precarious position that prevents it from taking sides in the Russo-Georgian conflict. END COMMENT.

PENNINGTON